No. 8

Museum Notes

INFORMATION SHEETS
from the
NEWFOUNDLAND MUSEUM

The Newfoundland Wolf

The vision of wolf packs roaming the shores of Red Indian Lake, or the outskirts of St. John's may seem fanciful to modern-day residents of the island of Newfoundland. Yet wolves did roam, for thousands of years, stalking the caribou through the country — living in balance with the creatures and the peoples of their remote island world. Then came the Europeans, ancestors to many of us, and wolf numbers began to decline.

Some found hunting the wolf to be good sport, and what more impressive creature to display as a parlour rug? Others, of course, were more practical. By all accounts, wolves were vicious and unpredictable killers. Livestock owners dreaded their coming and many settlers actually feared for their lives when they ventured into the country.

It cannot be denied that wolves probably did raid livestock pens at every opportunity. Obviously there was no need for them to waste time and energy trying to catch free-ranging caribou when fenced cows and goats were at hand. However, the settlers need not have worried about their own safety: to this day, there has not been a single authenticated case of a person being killed in North America by a healthy, unprovoked wolf. Worth noting as well, is the fact that a few enlightened Newfoundland folk blamed the half-wild dogs of the settlers for much that was being attributed to wolves. This, however, did not impress the general population who were also trying to survive in the country and intended to succeed.

On September 14, 1839, the colonial government proclaimed a wolf bounty of five pounds sterling, a considerable sum at that time. The fate of the Newfoundland Wolf was sealed. Sometime around the year 1925, the very last Newfoundland Wolf died. An apparently unique race had disappeared forever.

Despite a colourful history during its final years, very little is actually known about the Newfoundland Wolf. Most of the existing record was gathered by the late Dr. Leslie M. Tuck in two very informative articles published in 1947 and 1979. This Note attempts to consolidate the whole story and bring it up to date.

The first wolves to inhabit the island of Newfoundland probably arrived over the sea-ice from Labrador as the last glaciers retreated, perhaps 10,000 years ago. There is evidence to show that the species lived on the Great Northern Peninsula about 4500 years ago. In 1968, archaeologists led by Dr. James A. Tuck of Memorial University, unearthed parts of two wolf skulls in Maritime Archaic Indian burials at Port au Choix. The one intact specimen, an "upper jaw" or *maxilla*, is in the collection of the Newfoundland Museum.

The first written mention of wolves on the island, so far as can be found, was made in 1578 by Anthonie Parkhurst who commented, "I had almost forgot to speake of the plentie of wolves...". Captain Edward Hales, a member of Sir Humphrey Gilbert's expedition of 1583, also mentioned wolves. From this time onward, a great many Newfoundland letters and journals contained at least minor references to the species, so great seems to have been the fascination with wolves in the early days.

Captain William Colston wrote in his journal to

John Guy that his dogs had killed a wolf in the spring (?) of 1612; and John Guy, himself, wrote of being approached at Trinity in November of the same year by a Beothuck Indian waving a "Wolfes skin" flag. Captain Richard Whitbourne reported encountering wolves "three several times" in and around the fishing station of Trepassey in 1615. They were apparently quite friendly with his mastiff dog, and he appeared to speculate on their potential for domestication. It is possible that these remarkably friendly "wolves" were actually feral dogs; an abundant "species" at the time. A marginal note in Samuel Purchas' 1625 edition of Whitbourne's accounts gives a rather different picture of a wolf being viciously killed by the mastiff and greyhound of a Mr. Guies.

While some writers like Whitbourne seemed comfortable in the presence of wolves (if that is what they were), others took the dark side of the wolf myth to heart and trembled at the very thought of these traditionally much-feared creatures. Such is reflected in an extaordinary letter written by "N.H. - a Gentleman living at Ferryland" in 1622. It tells of an experience during a hunting trip w... : "In the night the Wolves being neere, did ...ething affright us with howlings, but did not hur... or wee had Dogs, Fire, and Sword to welcome them."

Throughout the 18th century, travellers continued to remark on wolves whenever they encountered them. Lieutenant John Cartwright makes mention of wolves in an account of a trip up the Exploits River in search of Beothuk Indians in 1768, and Aaron Thomas relates that his guide, Thomas Murphy, encountered a pack near Windsor Lake in the St. John's area in 1776.

A little later, an anonymous author, writing in an 1829 edition of the **Liverpool Mercury** tells how the appearance of a pack of wolves at a critical moment nearly foiled what was to become the infamous capture of the Beothuk woman, "Mary March", at Red Indian Lake in March of 1819. Shots fired at the wolves by John Peyton's men warned the nearby Indian camp in time for most of the Beothuks (who were being sought for raiding Peyton's establishment at the Mouth of Exploits) to flee into the woods. Peyton himself eventually managed to catch up with Mary March, the slowest of the party.

It is interesting to note that three years later William Epps Cormack saw many wolf tracks, but only one wolf during his epic walk across Newfoundland. However, the species appears to have remained quite plentiful. The missionary Edward Wix reported twelve wolves in one company on the west side of Placentia Bay in 1836.

Writers continued to chronicle the problem of "marauding" wolves. The Reverend William Wilson, for example, wrote that they were troublesome and had killed several sheep and cattle near Trinity in the winter of 1834. In fact, wolves had fallen into such ill-repute by 1839 that the government passed an act "to encourage the killing of wolves", which began:

> Whereas such injury has arisen to the Inhabitants from the Depredations of Wolves in this Island; and it is expedient to encourage the destruction of Said Animals.

By way of encouragement, a bounty of five pounds sterling was to be paid for each wolf destroyed.

J.B. Jukes noted in 1840 that wolves were playing havoc with livestock in the Colinet area, and he seemed to generally support the new bounty. Richard Bonnycastle, writing in 1842, described an episode involving a particularly fearsome wolf which came to be known as the "Turk's Gut Killer". After destroying considerable livestock in the St. John's area and losing a leg in a trap, this remarkable creature eluded pursuers for fifty rugged miles over the snow, while continuing to attack livestock. It was finally cornered at Turk's Gut, Brigus, and gunned down with a barrage of 56 shots! The ferocity with which it was dispatched is a good indication of the settlers' hatred and fear of wolves. Its remains were stuffed for Magistrate Pinsent of Brigus, but the present whereabouts of the skin is unknown. The wolf bounty was temporarily lifted in March 1863 (though there are records of bounties paid as late as September 30 of that year).

In 1865, Newfoundland trapper J.M. Nelson, collecting for Louis Agassiz, sent two complete skeletons and two additional skulls of the Newfoundland Wolf to the Museum of Comparative Zoology at Harvard University. These specimens still exist and the skeletons are the only complete ones known.

Wolves were becoming increasingly rare on the Avalon Peninsula by the 1870s, but their reputation continued as strong as ever. An incident said to have occurred on the Southside of St. John's in May 1874 serves to illustrate the extreme emotions that wolves continued to elicit at that time. The **North Star** reported that "a number of people, indiscriminantly armed with guns, pitchforks, etc.", apparently chased a wolf "for some time" in the area. In 1872, the bounty was reconfirmed and set at twelve dollars (though there are instances of ten dollar bounties being paid in 1873 and 1874). In 1882, the government paid out a record one hundred and thirty-two dollars in bounties for thirteen animals killed.

The winter of 1888-89 seems to have been a good season for encountering wolves on the west coast of the Island. The Reverend Charles W. Hollands wrote that unusually large numbers of both caribou and wolves were seen along the coast between Cow Head and Flowers Cove. He noted that "tracks of 25,

20 and 14 wolves have been seen in several places, chiefly in St. John's Bay on Doctor's Hills", but that the "highest number of wolves seen alive was five".

In 1896, Reverend Dr. Elwood Worcester shot a white Newfoundland Wolf near Grand Lake. He later presented the skin to the Museum of Comparative Zoology at Harvard University where it joined the skeletal material acquired earlier from J.M. Nelson. Reverend Worcester's rug lacked feet and a tail, but for many years it was the only skin of a Newfoundland Wolf known to exist.

By the turn of the 20th century, wolves were in serious decline, but sentiments towards them seem to have remained unchanged. An article in the **Evening Telegram** of St. John's on March 30, 1906 reports a pack of wolves seen by a telegraph lineman in the Topsails. The article suggested that "the government would do well to have these ferocious animals destroyed".

There were, however, some who questioned the seriousness of the wolf problem. Opinions such as the following make one wonder how often people blamed wolves automatically for almost any grisly deed. Captain W.R. Kennedy wrote:

> Wolves are not, in my opinion, so numerous as many suppose ... I do not believe they do half as much harm as they are credited with, and certainly not as much as the packs of half-wild, half-starved curs which infest the country. If government were to give a reward for every one of these brutes which was shot, it would be more to the purpose. They are without a doubt the curse of the country; no farmer can keep either sheep or cattle for fear of them. The settlers keep them for hauling lumber ... these brutal dogs are not fed, but they are left to get their own living.

To support his contention that there were large numbers of these dogs on the loose, Kennedy recorded that one person whose entire stock of animals was killed by the brutes, managed to kill 92 of them in short order!

William Whiteway, son of former Newfoundland Prime Minister, Sir William Whiteway, shot one of the last Newfoundland Wolves about 1911 in the Gaff Topsails. The skin was made into a wall-rug by taxidermist James R. Ewing of St. John's. In 1951, L.M. Tuck learned of the Whiteway wolf skin, and when it became apparent that the skin might be sold outside the province, he purchased it for the Newfoundland Natural History Society. It was hoped that the skin would eventually be placed in the Newfoundland Museum which, at the time, did not have the facilities to provide for its proper care. In 1958, the skin was sent by Tuck (who had been appointed "Keeper of the Skin") to the National Museum of Natural Sciences in Ottawa for safekeeping. At the request of the Newfoundland Museum, the rug was recently made into a taxidermied mount at the National Museum. The specimen (which is the only complete skin of a Newfoundland Wolf known) is now part of the Newfoundland Museum's collection, a donation from the Newfoundland Natural History Society. The skull, which was removed when the taxidermy was done, is the fifth known skull of the Newfoundland Wolf.

The last known bounty for a Newfoundland Wolf was paid in 1896. Interestingly enough, the government re-affirmed the twelve dollar bounty in 1916; a rather futile gesture because, at that time, the Newfoundland Wolf was on the verge of extinction. It is impossible to say for sure when the last one died. The Reverend John H. Moss wrote that the last known wolf in the Daniel's Harbour area was killed about 1920. Ernest Thomson Seton quoted a letter from Gower Rabbits, Secretary of the Newfoundland Game and Inland Fisheries Board, to the effect that two wolves were seen near St. George's in 1921, and two more crossed Birchy Lake in the winter of 1922-23. Certainly there was no viable population left by 1925. Remarkably, the "Killing of Wolves Act" (or wolf bounty act) was not repealed until 1963.

Why has the Newfoundland Wolf been distinguished from the "Labrador Wolf" (*Canis lupus labradorius*), which seems to have been its ancestor?

The original determination that set up the Newfoundland Wolf as a separate "subspecies" was made by two Harvard University zoologists, Glover M. Allen and Thomas Barbour in a 1937 paper. They

Newfoundland Wolf (*Canis lupus beothucus*). Newfoundland Museum collection.

examined the specimens at the Museum of Comparative Zoology, and compared them with wolf specimens from many other areas, including Labrador. They concluded that the Newfoundland Wolf, which they scientifically named *Canis lupus beothucus*, was recognizably different from other wolves.

Deciding that something is different, and being able to describe these differences scientifically, are two different matters. Allen and Barbour focused mainly on the teeth and they found that the shape of the slicing teeth *(carnassials)* in the upper jaw was consistently different in Newfoundland specimens.[1] There was also a larger gap *(diastema)* between the carnassial tooth and the immediately preceding third premolar tooth than is found in other wolves. Different as well in Newfoundland specimens were the comparative lengths of some of the snout bones.[2] It is interesting to note that the Newfoundland Museum specimen, which Allen and Barbour did not see, seems to fit their description extremely well. Even more interesting is the 4500 year old *maxilla* from Port au Choix, which appears, judging from the teeth, an intermediate form between the Newfoundland Wolf and the Labrador Wolf. Could this be a case of evolutionary change caught in the act?

Can we even make a distinction on the basis of such a small stock of evidence? The total of all Newfoundland Wolf specimens now stands at only two skeletons, three additional skulls, two skins (one incomplete) and one (presumably local) *maxilla*.

The whole matter as to whether the Newfoundland Wolf is actually a distinct subspecies really boils down to personal opinion. The essence of the matter is that Newfoundland once had its own resident population of wolves, and now they are gone.

No one really knows how many wolves lived in Newfoundland. Bonnycastle remarked in 1842 that "the country was well furnished with wolves", and there were frequent reports of wolves from all over the island until the beginning of this century. Wildlife scientists recognize that caribou was the staple diet of the Newfoundland Wolf, and estimates of caribou populations on the island in years past vary from 50,000 to 100,000. Using the approximation that a population of about 100 caribou will support one wolf, it can be suggested that the maximum wolf population on the island may sometimes have reached 1000 animals, though it is unlikely that this number was ever maintained after the arrival of the Europeans.

It seems a shame that island Newfoundlanders may never again hear the mournful, eerie howl of the wolf echoing through the hills, or never again thrill at a glimpse of one of these magnificent and much-maligned creatures ghosting, with eyes aglow, through the trees at dusk. Only lately are we realizing the true nature of these intelligent, and essentially gentle animals. Perhaps wolves in other parts will be luckier than ours.

JOHN E. MAUNDER
Winter 1982

Adapted, without cited references, by permission from **The Osprey**, Vol. 13, No. 2, June, 1982, pp. 36-49.

NOTES

1. The inner tooth face was indented adjacent to the main cusp, rather than ahead of it.
2. The nasal bones were 2½ times longer than the ascending arms of the premaxilla bones, rather than twice as long.

NEWFOUNDLAND MUSEUM
HISTORIC RESOURCES DIVISION
DEPARTMENT OF CULTURE, RECREATION & YOUTH
GOVERNMENT OF NEWFOUNDLAND AND LABRADOR